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ABSTRACT

These two articles, which are based on the comments of more than 2,000 readers of the American Association of Retired Persons' "AARP Bulletin," examine career changing in the United States. The first article, "Up and Away: Second Careers Taking Off," focuses on the specific careers that adults are moving into and out of and the factors driving adults to change careers, including the following: late-developing restlessness; job pressures; craving for adventure; need to help others; economic advancement; and need to find a new field after a job loss. The second article, "Career Changers Find Road to Success Marked by Perils," relates the experiences of a series of middle-age and older adult career changers to illustrate the pitfalls that may be encountered along the path to a new career. The importance of having a sense of adventure, optimism, and tenacity is emphasized along with the importance of gauging employability in a new career. Also discussed are the financial problems associated with obtaining the education that is often required to change careers, the time sometimes required to complete a career change, and possible difficulties in gaining the acceptance of younger coworkers. (MN)

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Up and Away:
Second Careers Taking Off

Career Changers Find Road to Success Marked by Perils

by Robert Lewis

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AARP BULLETIN

May 1996
Vol. 37, No. 5
Washington, D.C.

A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF RETIRED PERSONS

Joe Johnson, 68, was surprised when he was hired as a flight attendant. He'd answered the ad on a whim.

Up and away: second careers taking off

BY ROBERT LEWIS

Andrew Betz goes from running a bank's trust department to dealing blackjack. Mimi Kaplysh gives up acting for psychotherapy. One-time sales manager Joe Johnson becomes a flight attendant.

And former school teacher Mary Andes flies a commercial airplane. "Flying was the dream of my life and I intended to [fly planes] just to have fun," says Andes, now 68. But after getting her pilot's license 15 years ago, Freedom Air, a small carrier on Guam where she lives, offered her a job. Result: She now ferries passengers in the Mariana Islands. "I love it," she says.

Obviously, Betz, Kaplysh, Johnson and Andes aren't your average job-changers. They are different. They are people who, when push comes to shove, simply don't stop at changing jobs: They change careers.

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Second career success stories (clockwise from upper left): Mimi Kaplysh drew on an earlier interest and switched from acting to psychotherapy; Mary Andes retired from teaching, learned to fly and became a commercial pilot; James C. Walker turned his avocation as a volunteer firefighter into a career as a fire chief; Judi Hanson, a secretary/accountant all her adult life, learned to be a private investigator and opened her own agency; Andrew Betz quit banking behind to become a blackjack dealer.

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By so doing, they join an exclusive club. "These are exceptional people," says New York-based labor economist Audrey Freedman. "Anyone who departs on a major career path [in midlife] is a pioneer."

Particularly impressive, Freedman adds, is the fact "[these people] are taking risks, banking on their own sense of purpose, their own grit."

Unusual as they may be, the four aren't entirely alone. They are among more than 2,000 individuals age 50 and over who responded to a Sound Off questionnaire printed in the Bulletin last January.

First of two articles on changing careers

The Bulletin wanted to learn something about the incidence of career changing among older Americans, as well as the conditions that must be met for a successful career switch in mid or late life.

Readers' letters make clear that career changing, while not routine, remains a colorful aspect of the American work scene. And they illustrate that age by no means dampens the peculiarly American tendency to strike out in new directions.

Over and over, readers tell extraordinary stories of embarking on strikingly different careers. A sheep farmer becomes a college professor and a college professor becomes a martial arts instructor. A psychiatrist becomes an attorney and an attorney becomes a minister.

"What we have here is a distinctly American phenomenon," says social gerontologist Helen Dennis of the University of Southern California. "The sense of adventure—and the idea that tomorrow can be better than today."

This is the first of a two-part series describing career changing in America. A second article will appear in June examining why some career-changers succeed while others fail. This article focuses on what careers people are moving into and out of, and what's driving them.

Clearly one of the most powerful forces operating is a kind of late-developing restlessness. People talk of seizing a chance to realize a lifelong dream or fulfill some inner goal.

People like Mary Andes, the Mariana Islands pilot who always wanted to fly, and is now realizing that dream flying a six-passenger, single-engine Cherokee 6 around the Marianas for Freedom Air.

As a pilot of small planes, Andes isn't bound by the age-60 mandatory retirement rule for pilots of large aircraft. She must only pass annual medical checkups in order to keep flying. "The only cutoff is when I can't pass my medical," she says.

Similarly, James Walker of Gonzales, La., skirted pressures that generally force firefighters to retire early. He did so by joining the local fire department as chief at age 60 in a city that doesn't have a mandatory retirement policy for firefighters.

Things worked out just right for Walker. A former manager for a petrochemical company, Walker in 1984 was appointed chief by city officials with the assignment to upgrade the department's firefighting operations.

He did so well that, 12 years later, he remains the Gonzales fire chief. "I've had a lifelong interest in firefighting," says Walker, now 72, who recalls that he used to take time off from his old managerial job to attend firefighter training schools.

A craving for adventure seems to have motivated Judi Hanson to switch careers. Tired of the office jobs she'd held for 20 years, Hanson, now 53, of Midwest City, Okla., eight years ago enrolled in a school for private investigators that taught her, among other things, how to fire a .357 magnum. She also learned how to bring back fugitives and do surveillance work. She now runs her own agency and bills clients $40–$60 an hour as a private eye.

Hanson concedes there were a few bumps along the way. She recalls that her mother's initial reaction was, "You can't do that!" It was a different story with her three children and seven grandchildren. "They're proud," she says. "They're pleased I'm finally working at something I enjoy. They worry about me, though."

Another risk-taker is Joe Johnson of Arcadia, Calif., a former aerospace sales manager who on a whim answered a Northwest Airlines ad for flight attendants. He was 61 and had been downsized out of his last job.

"It was a 'cattle call' interview, and I almost didn't go," he says. "I thought because of my age they wouldn't consider me." Not only did he get considered, he got hired. He started 10 days after his 62nd birthday and now, at 68, flies both international and domestic routes.

A number of career-switchers say they are motivated not so much by money as by a strongly felt need to help others. Repeatedly, readers told the Bulletin they

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wanted to make some kind of positive contribution to society or correct some injustice.

Consider Francis Coughlin, a chest surgeon in New Canaan, Conn., who, having felt wronged when he lost a malpractice suit, decided to look into the legal system. That was 10 years ago.

Coughlin ended up getting a law degree. Now, at age 68, he is a legal consultant specializing in malpractice law. "I have the same enthusiasm for what I'm doing professionally as I did in the early days of my career in surgery," he says. "I explain the law to physicians and medicine to lawyers."

Driven by similar motives, many women, and a few men, enter nursing school in their 50s, often while holding full-time jobs.

Florence West, for example, was attracted to nursing because two daughters and a daughter-in-law were registered nurses. She enrolled in nursing school after retiring as postmaster of Collegedale, Tenn., in 1977.

Today, at age 77, she works as a nursing manager at a large long-term care facility. "I love the work," she says. "It keeps me busy and makes me feel good by being needed."

Drawn to another calling, Donna

Actress Gloria Brown (in glasses) chats with others at a Philadelphia casting call.

Guillaume, now 55, of Amherst, N.Y., gave up a real estate business three years ago to earn a master's of divinity degree. She was ordained in the Unitarian Church last fall and is now a hospital chaplain. "The ministry is a great second career," says Guillaume. "It fulfills the yearning to be all you can be. Life is a process and you can't stand fixed in one place without creating unhappiness for yourself."

Predictably, many people change careers for very practical reasons: economic advancement, or the need to find a new field after being laid off or downsized out of a job. Or simply survival. But the result can be the same as someone pursuing a fantasy.

Andrew Betz of Lake Charles, La., for example, a senior vice president and head of a bank's trust department, never dreamed he would one day make a living dealing blackjack in a riverboat casino. But that's where you can find him most evenings. Betz, 57, took an early retirement buyout last year and needed a job that would provide health insurance. "I interact with people well, and I love it here."

Mimi Kaplysh, 52, of Littleton, Colo., went through an equally startling job transformation. An actress since her college days, Kaplysh by the late 1980s was appearing in training films and commercials in the Denver area.

But an economic downturn left her with little work, so she took a college course in psychology. "Soon I was hooked," she says. "I was always interested in what makes people tick." She earned a master's degree in counseling and is now a therapist seeing 15 to 20 patients a week in a Denver-area mental health clinic.

Many Sound Off respondents said stress at their old jobs provided the motivation to change occupations.

"The pressures were so great they once hauled me out in an ambulance," says Gloria Brown of her former job as sales director for a hotel chain. She went to a tryout for models, got the job, hired an agent and now works as a model and movie extra. "The gray hair is what's getting me my jobs," says Brown, 61, of Elkins Park, Pa. "They're looking for the mature look."

Experts, however, caution that people shouldn't jump to the conclusion that career changing is easy. Many fail—the reasons for which will be explored next month.

Nor is career switching an everyday event. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that only 3 percent of workers in their 50s change occupations in any given year. The "mobility rate" is 12 percent for workers age 25–34 and 10 percent for the overall labor force.

To Martin Sicker, AARP work force programs director, these numbers suggest that successful career changing is not something everyone can pull off. "It can be done," he says. "Can everybody do it? Not likely."

But the very fact that people can defy the odds and even attempt something as ambitious as a career change strikes social gerontologist Dennis as quintessentially American.

In their optimism, in their belief that tomorrow will be better than today, these people are quite American, says Dennis. "And so is the sense of adventure we see here. All this is distinctly American."

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AARP BULLETIN

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A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF RETIRED PERSONS

FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELTS

Career changers find road to success marked by perils

BY ROBERT LEWIS

One-time postmaster Florence West spent two years working for a scrap of paper that would change her life. Ex-waitress Valerie Kroon labored seven for a similar document.

And former clergyman Robert Sykes toiled two years to prepare himself for a specialty that didn't pan out and another two years getting ready for one that did.

After four years of struggle, a period that included lean times and even a spell on welfare, Sykes got what he wanted. "I felt that I was finally doing what I was called upon to do," recalls Sykes, now 64.

The scraps of paper that West, Kroon and Sykes struggled so tenaciously to obtain were diplomas or certificates needed to permit their entry into altogether new careers.

The experiences of all three suggest the enormous lengths that people willingly go to these days to switch from one career to another.

As the stories of West, Kroon and Sykes vividly illustrate, managing a successful career change isn't easy.

Even when people take all the right steps—and people don't always do so—success isn't assured. Sizable numbers of would-be career changers unfortunately run aground each year.

Florence West

But many people remain undaunted by the pitfalls. Filled with a sense of adventure and pursuing a longtime goal, or simply forced to change because of work problems, large numbers each year attempt to change their established career or vocation.

That's what the AARP Bulletin discovered when more than 2,000 readers responded to

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a January Sound Off column. The Bulletin wanted to learn something about the incidence of career changing among older Americans, as well as the conditions that must be met for a successful change.

Many readers told gripping stories of embarking on excitingly different careers, while others reported running into barriers or experiencing unexpected reverses.

Predictably, not everyone was able to overcome these hurdles. About one of five answering the questionnaire said their quest for a new career ended unhappily.

Last month, in the first of a two-part series, the Bulletin focused on the driving forces behind changing careers. This article looks at "what it takes" to effect a career change.

From what Bulletin readers say, careful planning is key, followed closely by a willingness to invest sizable amounts of time and money, endure and overcome hardship and, not to be overlooked, enjoy some luck.

Also, Bulletin readers hint at the importance of certain qualities of character—a sense of adventure, optimism and just plain tenacity.

In fact, Bulletin readers seem to confirm the importance of character traits identified by Philip Mirvis, an author and business consultant, as necessary for successful career change. "Adaptability, emotional maturity and a sense that you want to accomplish more in life are crucial elements of job change," Mirvis says.

Such qualities seem to embody Robert Sykes of Lansdale, Pa., an Episcopal clergyman for 25 years who left the ministry "to get real hands-on experience" helping people. As a pastor, "I didn't feel I was reaching people," Sykes explains.

Although married and with three children in college, Sykes resigned his position in 1979 and returned to college, a step that led to a degree in gerontology two years later.

"That proved to be next to no use" in taking him to a new career, Sykes says. Undismayed, he returned to school again, this time enrolling in a two-year nursing program.

All the while Sykes and his wife were skimping on pennies as he worked for modest pay as a licensed practical nurse. For a time the couple received welfare in the form of food stamps and heating allowances.

But all this struggle paid off when Sykes got his degree as a registered nurse and a job in a state hospital as a psychiatric nurse. "This turned out to be a very rewarding, very exciting career," he says. "I felt I was giving people some relief—I was being their advocate."

In fact, of all the second careers readers reported entering, few were more popular than nursing.

One explanation comes from Florence West, who at age 58 enrolled in Cleveland State Community College in Tennessee after retiring as postmaster of the Collegedale, Tenn., post office. Nineteen years later, at age 77, she is nursing manager at a long-term-care facility in nearby Chattanooga.

Why nursing? Not only are jobs plentiful, but, says West, the work is extremely satisfying. "When I started studying the human body," she recalls, "it felt like a whole new world was opening up to me."

Going back to school isn't always easy for someone in midlife, as Virginia Levi of Bridgeville, Pa., discovered some years ago. A secretary, she wanted to be a nurse and, at age 53, entered nursing school.

But she had no college experience. "It was hard to get in the study mode," Levi says. "But I was determined that once I started I would not fail."

She credits younger students in her class for bolstering her resolve. "The kids embraced me," says Levi, now 67, who once out of college acquired a nursing position. "They were very, very supportive," even to the point of inviting her to their parties. "They seemed to have decided to take me under their wing and get me through."

Donald Shaffer, a New York City businessman, seriously considered dropping out after enrolling in law school when he was 59. "I had a much more difficult time than I expected," says Shaffer, now 67. "The physical rigor and emotional demands of law school were quite heavy."

Shaffer finally got his degree, however, and, borrowing on his experience as a community organizer with the American Civil Liberties Union, he now works as a pro bono attorney for the ACLU in the area of unequal educational opportunity.

Sometimes a lot of time is required to make the transition from one vocation to another. Consider Valerie Kroon of Pembroke, Mass., a waitress forced by a back injury in 1979 to find a more sedentary job.

Entering college at age 45 she spent seven years earning bachelor's and master's degrees in social work. At age 61, she now works as a professional employment counselor for the chronically mentally ill at the Brockton (Mass.) Multi-Service Center.

But, she quickly points out, she isn't working happily, thereby illustrating that even after years of hard work a career-change effort can end disappointingly.

The problem is money; she feels her salary isn't commensurate with her schooling. "For what we do, and considering this is a very stressful position, we don't make the money we deserve," she says.

But for some people the transition to a new career is speedier and the outcome a lot more satisfying.

In fact, it's hard to imagine an easier—or more complete—career-switch than that made by Noel Eberz. As a geology professor at San Jose State University in California, Eberz periodically escorted students on Colorado River boating trips through the Grand Canyon.

"As I got closer to retirement," Eberz recalls, then living in San Jose, "I asked myself why am I driving this 800 miles to the Grand Canyon."

Five years ago Eberz retired from teaching and two years later moved to

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On the job, the seasoned Kroon counsel, an (clockwise from top left): Clinical social worker Valerie Kroon, who often counts with clients in coffee shops or restaurants; English major Jamal Riddle, teaching part time to help immigrants adjust to American ways; and river guide Noel Eberz, packing rafts and other gear for a trip through the Grand Canyon.

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Flagstaff, Ariz., to become a Grand Canyon river guide. After passing tests demonstrating familiarity with boating operations and wilderness camping, Eberz was certified by the Grand Canyon National Park as an official river guide.

Now, at age 63, Eberz six times a year takes tourists—sometimes as many as 24 in a group—on 228-mile excursions down the Colorado, each one lasting about two weeks.

Qualifying to be a guide was relatively simple, Eberz says, but getting accepted by other guides was another matter. "You have to make sure you're carrying your share of the load with younger guides," he says. "It's a matter of showing effort and persistence."

But sometimes "effort and persistence" simply aren't enough to produce a successful career change, as Janet Hinkle discovered.

Hinkle, 54, of Waterford, Calif., set out eight years ago to get a college education. She picked a specialty—teaching English as a second language (ESL)—that at the time seemed to offer many opportunities.

"As many as 36 native languages are spoken by students in area schools," says Hinkle, 54. "I thought this would be a ticket to a good job."

But funds to hire ESL teachers dried up due to budget cuts. Hinkle is teaching part time and gets her master's degree this month, but has only one offer—to teach a single community college class in the fall. "That will hardly feed me," she laments.

Over and over, people who neglect to gauge their employability in a new career receive a rude shock.

At least that's what happened to Brunhilde Gaughan. Gaughan, 53, of Southhampton, Pa., worked for years as a secretary but longed to be a journalist. To achieve her dream she attended college part time for 10 years while working nights.

Two years ago, diploma in hand, she started applying for a full-time reporting job. "I sent out a million resumes," she says, "but it turned out newspapers were laying off people." Result: she now has a journalism degree but no journalism job and little prospect of getting one.

But people who fail to markedly gain from a career-change effort should still feel good about themselves, say experts, because they are part of a very exclusive club—the club of courageous risk-takers.

Whether people succeed or not, the act of simply trying to change life's direction "is the mark of a person who is not afraid of failure," says social gerontologist Helen Dennis of the University of Southern California. "They may have had failure in life," she says, "but they survived it."

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